

Risk Factors for Delinquency

Risk factors are personal traits, characteristics of the environment, or conditions in the family, school, or community that are linked to youths' likelihood of engaging in delinquency and other problem behaviors (Murray and Farrington 2010). The presence of risk factors and the early exposure to them has been shown to increase the likelihood that youths will engage in early delinquent behavior during adolescence and continue to offend throughout the life course (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2012; Mmari, Blum, and Teufel-Shone 2010). For example, youths who witness violent crimes in their neighborhoods or experience abuse/neglect in their homes at a young age have an increased chance of engaging in violent acts later in life (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2012).

The idea of risk factors is common across a number of different fields. For example, in the medical field, doctors often assess their patients' risk factors for certain ailments, such as cancer or diabetes, and recommend certain courses of action that patients can take to reduce their odds of becoming sick. Similarly, in the justice field, there are certain risk factors that increase youths' odds of becoming delinquent (Shader n.d). Treatment or prevention programming may target those risk factors, to reduce the chances that youths will commit delinquent acts or escalate into committing serious and violent offenses.

There is no single risk factor that can predict who is likely (or not likely) to engage in delinquent behavior (Mmari, Blum, and Teufel-Shone 2010), but the effect is cumulative: the more risk factors present in a youth's life, the greater the probability of the youth committing delinquent acts (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2012; Green et al. 2008; Wasserman et al. 2003). Similarly, prolonged exposure to risk factors may increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, and age of exposure to risk factors amplifies this relationship (Green et al. 2008; Hoeve et al. 2009). In other words, the younger a child is when exposed to risk factors and the longer that the child is exposed to those factors, the greater the risk that the child will engage in later delinquent behavior.

Furthermore, while exposure to more than one type of risk factor may increase cumulative risk, it can also separate *high-risk* from *at-risk* youths. *At-risk* youths can include any child who is exposed to a risk factor, whereas *high-risk* youths are children who are exposed to multiple risk factors, particularly when this exposure occurs at a young age (Odgers et al. 2008; le Vries et al. 2015). For example, school adjustment problems associated with a stressful life event, such as the death of a parent, may worsen when another stressful event or circumstance, such as witnessing a violent crime in the neighborhood, happens at the same time (Draper and Hancock 2011).

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In addition, there are two types of risk factors: static and dynamic. *Static* risk factors are those historical characteristics of juveniles that cannot be changed through treatment or programming, such as history of violent behavior and parental criminality. *Dynamic* risk factors are characteristics that can change over time, because of treatment or the normal developmental process (Vincent, Guy, and Grisso 2012). Some examples are poor parenting practices, association with delinquent peers, and poor academic achievement. (For information about the use of risk factors in assessments of youths, see [Risk/Needs Assessments for Youths](#)).

Risk factors are typically organized into the following domains (see the discussion below for further details on the five domains):

- *Individual* (e.g., biological and psychological dispositions, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, problem behaviors)
- *Peer* (e.g., norms, activities, attachment)
- *Family* (e.g., function, management, bonding, abuse/violence)
- *School* (e.g., bonding, climate, policy, performance)
- *Community* (e.g., bonding, norms, resources, poverty level, crime)

Although risk factors can take on a variety of forms, from biological traits to broad environmental conditions, they all increase a youth's vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2012; Wong, Slotboom, and Bijleveld 2010).

Risk factors can have both direct and indirect effects on overall risk. For example, environmental conditions, such as poverty, can directly affect a child by lowering the quality of food and shelter. Poverty also acts an indirect risk factor, because it puts parents under strain, which may negatively affect familial relationships, ultimately leading to the breakdown of family bonds, which has been shown to increase delinquent behavior in youths (Hoeve et al. 2012).

Risk factors are also related to the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. For example, early in a child's life, risk factors are tied to individual factors (such as hyperactivity) and family factors (such as poor parenting practices). However, as the child grows up, new risk factors related to influences from peers, the school, and the community begin to play a larger role in the child's life (Wasserman et al. 2003). Research suggests that delinquency prevention efforts that are implemented during early childhood may be more effective at reducing the likelihood of delinquency than intervention programs targeted at adolescents who have already engaged in delinquent acts; as youths grow up and encounter additional risk factors, they will need more treatment or rehabilitative services to bring them back to a normal developmental trajectory (Zagar, Busch, and Hughes 2009).

While the presence and exposure to risk factors can increase the likelihood of negative outcomes for youths, protective factors can diminish the occurrence of negative outcomes and increase resiliency. For example, living in a disadvantaged and disorganized neighborhood is a risk factor for delinquency, while having a supportive relationship with parents and other family members is a protective factor. The good relationship with family may not affect the neighborhood conditions, but it can buffer youths

from some of the negative effects of living in a poor area (Mmari, Blum, and Teufel-Shone 2010). (For more information, see the Model Programs Guide literature review on [Protective Factors](#))

Finally, research has also begun to examine risk factors related to specific subgroups of youths and how they may be affected differently. For example, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youths face risk factors that are particular to tribal communities, such as the loss of tribal language and culture (Mmari, Blum, and Teufel-Shone 2010). Similarly, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youths face certain risks because of their sexual orientation, including rejection from family members (Ryan et al. 2009). Further research is needed to thoroughly explore the particular risk factors that disproportionately affect certain populations of youths, and examine how prevention and intervention programming can appropriately target these groups and reduce their risk for delinquency and criminal behavior.

Theoretical Background

Research on risk factors is grounded in the following theoretical perspectives: the social-ecological model of development, social learning theory, social bond-social control theory, and social disorganization theory.

The multidomain aspect of risk factors draws from the social-ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 2005), which sets out multiple levels of influence on child development, from the individual to the microsystem (a child's immediate surroundings, including family and school); the exosystem (an environment in which a child is not directly involved, but may have an effect on the child, such as a parent's workplace); and the macrosystem (the larger cultural context).

Social learning theory (Akers 1973; Bandura 1977, 1986) emphasizes the role of social surroundings within families, schools, peers, and communities and how these relationships affect delinquent behavior (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2012). Social learning explains how risk factors can influence delinquent behavior, especially if youths are exposed to negative stimuli and antisocial surroundings. For example, by following the example set by antisocial peers, youths can be pressured into experimenting with drugs or engaging in other delinquent behavior.

Social bond-social control theory (Hirschi 1969) claims that the absence of "conventional ties" is highly predictive of delinquency (Vaughn et al. 2009; Church, Wharton, and Taylor 2009), including bonds to 1) institutions (family or school); 2) beliefs (laws and normative standards); and 3) prosocial others (teachers, parents, peers). Family-based risk factors, such as parental criminality, also contribute to the weakening of an adolescent's social bonds (Glasgow Erickson, Crosnoe, and Dornbusch 2000). If these bonds are weakened, particularly early in life, the youth may be at an increased risk of delinquency throughout the life course (Murray and Farrington 2010).

Social disorganization theory (Shaw and McKay 1942) is a variation of social bond theory that focuses specifically on external influences of communities where youths live (Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2012). Common examples include neighborhoods with high crime rates and gang activity, availability of drugs and alcohol, and high poverty rates. A youth growing up in a disadvantaged area may therefore be at increased risk for delinquency (Murray and Farrington 2010).

Risk Factor Domains and Indicators

Risk factor indicators are ways that researchers and practitioners understand and measure the presence of risk factors. For example, antisocial behavior and delinquent beliefs can be measured using official arrest records or self-reports of delinquent behavior (Murray and Farrington 2010). As mentioned

above, risk factors (as well as protective factors) are organized into the following five categories: individual, family, peer, school, and community levels.

Each of the following sections includes descriptions of the risk factor categories and the related indicators, which may be used to measure the corresponding risk factors. The sections below also provide examples of evidence-based programs that aim to reduce risk factors and decrease the occurrence of delinquency and problem behaviors among youths.

Individual-Level Risk Factors

Factors in this sphere are identified as any characteristics directly related to or within a specific person that affect the likelihood of that individual engaging in violent and delinquent behavior. Individual risk factors vary among youths, but stem from many origins such as genetics, early moral development, personality traits, negative life events, and attitudes toward delinquency (Wong, Slotboom, and Bijleveld 2010; Hodgins, Kratzer, and McNeil 2001). Genetic risk factors include cognitive deficiencies, conduct disorders, and mental illness (le Vries et al. 2015). Non-genetic examples include an antisocial personality, substance abuse problems, and past physical or sexual abuse (Hoeve et al. 2009; Wasserman et al. 2010). Examples of some individual-level risk factors and their indicators are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Individual-Level Risk Factors and Indicators*	
Risk Factors	Indicators
Antisocial behavior and alienation (delinquent beliefs, general delinquency involvement)	-Attempted suicides -Juvenile arrests for vandalism, drug abuse, or general alcohol- or drug-related arrests -Reported gang involvement -Rebelliousness -Antisocial personality
Gun possession (illegal gun ownership or carrying a gun)	-Self-report of gun carrying on school property -Juvenile arrests for weapons or gun possession -Gun confiscations at school
Favorable attitudes toward drug use, early onset of substance use	-Positive attitudes toward alcohol abuse or drug use -Juvenile self-reported first and/or regular use of alcohol or drugs -Drug use initiated before age of 15
Early onset of aggression or violence or other problem behaviors	-Aggressive in grades K-3 -Juvenile arrests for violent crime and serious violent crime -Juvenile externalizing behavioral problems -Drop out of school before 9th grade
Violent victimization and children exposed to violence	-Injured in a physical fight -Threatened or injured by a weapon -Dating violence -Past physical or sexual abuse

Cognitive and neurological deficits, mental/behavioral health disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Learning disabilities -Emotional disturbances -Traumatic brain injury -Attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) -Low self control, impulsiveness -Special education enrollment -Low IQ -Sensation seeking
*From: DSG 2001; ADBH 2011; Arthur et al. 2002	

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) Program. The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) program aims to reduce aggression and behavior problems in elementary school-aged children. The curriculum focuses on the developmental integration of affect, behavior, and cognitive understanding as they relate to social and emotional competence.

In an evaluation of the PATHS program, Kam, Greenberg, and Kusche (2004) found that children in the intervention group displayed a significant increase in the percentage of solutions that were non-confrontational, indicating higher levels of self-control. Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg (2007) found that the intervention group scored significantly better than the comparison group on measures of social competence. Specifically, the program was effective in reducing risk factors related to self-control and emotion regulation, and aiding the development of prosocial relationships with others. For more information on the program, please click on the link below.

[Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies \(PATHS\)](#)

Family-Level Risk Factors

Factors at the family level are related to family structure, support, and functioning (Wong, Slotboom, and Bijleveld 2010; Hovee et al. 2012). Family-related risk factors typically include low attachment to parents, negative parenting styles, family conflict or disruption, and parents with past criminality or substance abuse problems (Murray and Farrington 2010). Other studies have found that parental education level and marital status can also have an impact on delinquency (Green et al. 2008; Demuth and Brown 2004). Family-level risk factors and their indicators are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Family-Level Risk Factors and Indicators*	
Risk Factors	Indicators
Family history of problem behavior/parent criminality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Family members in alcohol or other drug treatment programs -Pregnant mothers using alcohol -Babies born with fetal alcohol syndrome -Parents with criminal records; arrests and convictions of parents -Incarcerated parents
Family management problem/poor parental supervision and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Children living outside of the family -Lack of parental involvement in child's school

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Poor supervision -Lack of caring, supportive adults -Large families
Poor family attachment/bonding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Single-parent homes -Absence of caring adults -Youth in foster care -Death of a parent
Child victimization and maltreatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reported child abuse and neglect cases -Unpaid child support -Requests for social service intervention
Pattern of high family conflict and/or violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Divorce -Domestic violence arrests -Intimate partner violence, intimate murders -911 calls for domestic violence
Sibling antisocial behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Juvenile arrests for other siblings -Older siblings encourage antisocial behavior
Parental use of physical punishment/harsh and erratic discipline practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Inconsistent discipline -Harsh discipline -No discipline or few rules at home -Poor supervision
Low parental education level/illiteracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Low educational attainment (less than 12 years of school) -Low adult literacy -Low involvement of parents in school
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur 2002	

Functional Family Therapy (FFT). Functional Family Therapy (FFT) is a family-based program for high-risk youths that addresses multidimensional problems by decreasing family-related risk factors. Targeted youths generally are at risk for delinquency, violence, substance use, or other behavioral problems such as conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder. FFT therapists maintain a strengths-based relationship with clients and decrease the negativity that often characterizes these high-risk youths and families, such as hopelessness and low self-efficacy. Goals are to reduce and eliminate problem behaviors and family relational patterns through behavior change interventions (skills training in family communication, parenting, problem solving, and conflict management).

Sexton and Turner (2010) found that FFT delivered by therapists who highly adhered to the FFT model resulted in significantly lower recidivism rates (20 percent) for youths with the highest levels of family and peer risk in the sample. In addition, Celinska, Furrer, and Cheng (2013) also found that FFT had a positive effect on youths in the areas of reducing risk behavior, increasing strengths, and improving functioning across key life domains. For more information on Family Functional Therapy, please click on the link below:

[Functional Family Therapy \(FFT\)](#)

Peer-Related Risk Factors

Factors in the peer domain are related to peer norms and attachment, socialization, and interactions with peers (Hoeve et al. 2009). Risk factors can include delinquent friends, gang membership, and the quality of peer relationships (Wong, Slotboom, and Bijleveld 2010). Earlier exposure to negative peer influences has a strong effect on delinquency risk, and the influence of negative peers may increase other risk factors such as dropping out of school or disengaging from society. For example, children who are exposed to drug-using peers are more likely to begin using drugs themselves (Odgers et al. 2008). Peer-related risk factors and their indicators are presented below in Table 3.

Table 3: Peer-Related Risk Factors and Indicators*	
Risk Factors	Indicators
Gang involvement or gang membership	-Gang activity participation -Police reports of youth gang activity -Perceived peer gang involvement
Peer alcohol and drug use	-Peers' positive attitudes toward alcohol abuse or drug use -Reported use of alcohol and drugs by friends
Association with delinquent or aggressive peers	-Violent friends -Peer arrests for violent offenses -Peer rejection by prosocial peers -Antisocial romantic partner
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur 2002	

First Step to Success. First Step to Success is an early intervention program designed to prevent antisocial behavior in schools by identifying children with antisocial behavior and helping them to develop the competencies needed to build effective teacher- and peer-related social-behavioral adjustments. The program targets kindergartners who show early signs of antisocial behavior, addressing peer-related risk factors such as peer rejection and the potential for developing maladaptive peer relationships. Behavioral coaches work with teachers and parents who help teach students skills and behaviors to use in place of inappropriate actions, providing positive reinforcement for good behavior. The goals of the program are to decrease or eliminate early symptoms of antisocial behavior, and ultimately prevent the escalation of maladaptive behavioral adjustment.

Walker and colleagues (2005) found that the program resulted in significant improvements regarding adaptive behavior and increased students' academic engagement. Walker and colleagues (2009) also found that the program significantly reduced problem behaviors and functional impairment in addition to increased academic engagement. Specifically, the program acted as a buffer to negative peer relationships by improving adaptive behavioral skills and overall problem behavior. By improving academic engagement, students also developed conventional ties (i.e., social bonds) to the school, making them less influenced by antisocial peer relationships. For more information on the First Step to Success program, please click on the link below:

[First Step to Success](#)

School-Related Risk Factors

Factors at the school level are typically related to school attendance, academic performance, and attachment and commitment to school (Wong, Slotboom, and Bijleveld 2010). For instance, academic failure and dropping out of school tend to be associated with the occurrence of violent behavior (le Vries 2015; Hawkins et al. 2000); however, exclusion from school may compromise development of

supportive social relationships, creating a cumulative risk for criminal behavior (Draper and Hancock 2011). Risk factors and their indicators unique to the school sphere are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: School-Related Risk Factors and Indicators*	
Risk Factors	Indicators
Low academic achievement/academic failure	-Average student reading, math, and science proficiency -Academic failure beginning in elementary school (grades 4-6)
Negative attitude toward school/low bonding, low school attachment, low commitment to school	-Suspensions or expulsions from school -Frequent school transitions -Low academic aspirations -Low parental college expectations for child -Low commitment to school -Disciplinary problems in elementary school
Inadequate school climate/poorly organized and functioning schools/negative labeling by teachers	-Exposure to abuse by students, bullying -Violence/crime in schools -Teacher attitudes, job satisfaction -Physical decay of school -High levels of distrust between teachers and students
School dropout	-School dropout status -Truancy, frequent absences, chronic absenteeism
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur et al. 2002	

Eisenhower Quantum Opportunities. The Eisenhower Quantum Opportunities (also known as the Eisenhower Foundation’s Quantum Opportunities Program) is an intensive, year-round, multicomponent intervention for disadvantaged teens during their 4 years in high school. The program was designed as a youth-investment and youth-development intervention for high-risk minority students in inner-city neighborhoods. Youths targeted by the program are considered at risk for academic failure. The goal of the program is to improve academic achievement and attitudes toward school, increase rates of high school graduation and the number of students who advance to postsecondary education or training, and decrease problem behaviors.

A multisite evaluation of the program by Curtis and Bandy (2015) showed that youths who participated in the Eisenhower Quantum Opportunities (who are referred to as Quantum Associates) had a significantly higher final grade point average, significantly higher graduation rate, and significantly higher college acceptance rate, as compared with youths in the control group. For more information on Eisenhower Quantum Opportunities, please click on the link below.

[Eisenhower Quantum Opportunities](#)

Community-Level Risk Factors

Factors at the community level are generally related to the physical environment, economic and recreational opportunities, existing social supports, and other characteristics or structures that affect

successful community functioning (Kaufman 2005; Reingle, Jennings, and Maldonado-Molina 2011). Communities that are disadvantaged, disordered, and disorganized tend to have higher rates of crime and delinquency. Specifically, research has shown that youths who have witnessed violence in their neighborhoods are more likely to engage in violent, assaultive behavior and carry weapons (Patchin et al. 2006). Risk factors and their indicators that are unique to the community sphere are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Community-Level Risk Factors and Indicators*	
Risk Factors	Indicators
Availability of alcohol and other drugs	-Total alcoholic beverage sales by location -Trends in exposure to drug and alcohol use -Perceived availability of alcohol and drugs
Availability of firearms	-Firearms in the home -Firearms sales
Community crime/high crime neighborhood	-Violent crime rate -Weapons-related charges -Murder rate, murders by weapon -Gang-related activity reported by law enforcement agencies -Adult drug- and/or alcohol-related arrests -Adult property-crime arrests
Community instability	-Children moving or high rates of mobility -Low home ownership rates -Rental occupied housing -Property vacancy
Economic deprivation/poverty/residence in a disadvantaged neighborhood	-Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) -Children and/or families living below poverty level, living without health insurance -Food stamp program recipients -Participation in free and reduced lunch programs -Unemployment rates
Social and physical disorder/disorganized neighborhood/feeling unsafe in the neighborhood	-Poor external housing conditions/physical deterioration -Vandalism and graffiti -Broken light fixtures in public areas -Non-enforcement of building code violations/condemned buildings -Resident self-report on safety and fear of crime
*From: DSG 2001; Arthur 2002	

Operation Peacekeeper. Operation Peacekeeper is a community and problem-oriented policing program designed to reduce gang involvement among urban youths aged 10 to 18 and decrease gun-related violence among gang-involved youths. Operation Peacekeeper relies on Youth Outreach

Workers who work in neighborhood settings wherever young people at risk of violence are found – including schools, parks, street corners, and apartment complexes – to communicate to youths that they have better options for their lives. Youth Outreach Workers serve as mentors and positive role models. Their role is to make sure youths understand the consequences of violence and that there are positive alternatives to gang membership.

An evaluation by Braga (2008) showed that the Operation Peacekeeper strategy was associated with an overall 42 percent decrease in the monthly number of gun homicide incidents. For more information on Operation Peacekeeper, please click on the link below:

[Operation Peacekeeper](#)

Conclusion

Risk factors are characteristics that tend to be associated with the probability of youths becoming delinquent (Murray and Farrington 2010; Mmari, Blum, and Teufel-Shone 2010). Risk factors are typically organized into the following domains: individual, peer, family, school, and community. A wide variety of research has been done to determine what factors in youths' lives can increase their risk of engaging in delinquent and other problem behaviors, and what can be done to decrease that risk. Programs focused on reducing risk factors have been emerging based on this research.

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